



Rachel S. Mikva, *Interreligious Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. xi + 356, ISBN 978-1108826600. £26.99

This is a significant work of scholarship by Rachel Mikva: a very good introduction, and a valuable contribution to religious education, as well as to the wider concerns of societies characterised by increasingly diverse populations. In terms of religious education, interreligious studies shifts the focus away from learning about (and ideally from) religious traditions, to learning between them, with the emphasis on human interactions and relationships across sometimes irreconcilable differences.

The book is in three parts. In the first, ‘mapping the field’, the author introduces the challenges and opportunities of interreligious studies and engagement, contextualising these historically, philosophically and theologically. She advocates a form of ‘parity pluralism’ in which different lifestances are regarded as having equal merit, without any artificial sense that they are somehow all the same. Differences are dignified, and variety is welcomed as both interesting and beautiful. This is not lazy relativism, however; parity pluralism is rooted in an ethical framework in which ‘religions are true insofar as they orient people toward justice and liberation’ (p. 71). This in itself represents a hidden hierarchy of traditions, however, relying on a supposedly universal sense of what justice and liberation mean. The ‘philosophical grounds’ section is perhaps the weakest in the book, misrepresenting John Hick’s transcendental pluralism for the view that ‘no single lifestance is more effective at transforming lives than another’ (p. 74) – this was clearly not Hick’s position.

The second part examines the ‘meeting spaces’ where religious differences are encountered – be this in the workplace, online or in other public spaces. Pressing issues of antisemitism and Islamophobia are explored and unpacked. The terms are explored and explained, contextualised and critiqued, but objections to the rather questionable appropriation of the ‘phobia’ suffix are dismissed on the grounds that ‘there are other terms we use in a similar manner’ (p. 194). Given the rigour of the rest of the work, it is disappointing that the widespread usage of this inappropriate suffix – a term appropriated from psychiatry and clinical psychology – is not more robustly critiqued. Widespread usage does not make it right.

The third part of the book outlines ‘modes of engagement’, giving illustrative examples of good practices employed in communicating across



and between cultural and religious divides. The focus here on practical skills which might usefully be employed in dealing with difference is one of the great virtues of the book.

Despite the book's many strengths, however, there is something lurking beyond the pages, which cannot be ignored. The author acknowledges that sometimes avoiding the 'elephant in the room' prevents us from seeing all the 'other animals at the zoo' (p. 244), and she does a splendid job of introducing the menagerie here, but the haunting, predatory presence of the hostile critic, the anti-religious sneering bully cannot and should not be ignored. Perhaps this lacuna reflects the USA-centred perspective of the book, where clearly the issues of identity politics are more widely experienced than in the UK. For Scotland, in particular, the omission of non-religious perspectives from this volume is rather glaring, given that in the 2022 census over 36.7% of respondents identified as having 'no religion',²⁰⁰ compared to the figure of 28% in the USA.²⁰¹ Not the largest of differences, perhaps, but still a significant one. This is not to suggest that all non-religious people are hostile to religion, but in the UK hostility to religion is ever-present in popular culture, where mockery of religion is commonplace (witness for example, the mysteriously popular Ricky Gervais and the 'equal-opportunities offender' Jimmy Carr). It is rather odd that in the chapter on "Media, Old and New" (p. 122 ff.) the focus on hate mail (and worse) directed towards religious believers, is entirely on that coming from those of other faiths; the hostile 'militant atheist' is nowhere mentioned. *Interreligious Studies* cannot be faulted for not doing what it does not set out to do, namely engage with this hostility, but there is a lingering sense that the good work being done in the name of interreligious dialogue is akin to the brave, doomed playing of the musicians on the deck of the Titanic. Their work may have helped to calm the passengers, and may well have prevented catastrophic panic, but the ship sank, and many hundreds perished. Nevertheless, it would still have been an honour to play alongside them, as it would be to join the

²⁰⁰ See <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/religion/>.

²⁰¹ See Gregory A. Smith et al., "Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe", *Pew Research Center*, 24 January 2024: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.



conversations of the sincere searchers for peace and harmony that are illustrated in this book.

The author never characterises interreligious encounters as being easy. The stakes can be high, the grievances sometimes run deep; cultural memories are long, and our propensities to prejudice are manifold. The author repeatedly asserts that differences not only exist between traditions, but within them, and between individuals. Sometimes this goes to an extreme: ‘training in interreligious leadership begins with an embrace of multiplicity – being radically aware that all people do not see *anything* the same way’ (p. 307). Yet at other times the author confidently asserts universalities where none exist – ‘we understand ourselves and our world by the construction and reconstruction of narratives’ (p. 240); ‘people live their lives through stories’ (p. 309). There seems no awareness here that there are many who live their lives devoid of such stories and may yet still have lives of meaning and value. At the same time, the author acknowledges that ‘simplicity is misleading because we do not all agree on the common good’ (p. 268), while still advocating for shared enterprises.

The importance of acknowledging the individuality of perspectives is repeatedly emphasised, that individuals ‘speak *from* rather than *for* the entirety of their traditions’ (p. 250) – this is a helpful counterbalance to the habitual characterisation of groups on the basis of limited, or even individual encounters. Representations of traditions are powerful, and our minds rush to generalise on the basis of sometimes very limited experiences. Accepting that an individual person is just that, and not necessarily an ambassador for their whole way of life, would be a significant step in the right direction. The individual perspective has its own inherent limitations, however. Taken to the extreme (and the author does so, e.g. ‘participants get to define themselves – not constrained by how media, textbooks, or religious hierarchies see them’ [p. 220]), it is difficult to see how such encounters are ‘interreligious’ at all, rather than simply encounters between individuals. The category of ‘religious’ becomes so slippery, so mercurial, that it hardly means anything at all.

At the heart of the interreligious project is an acknowledgement that not all differences are reconcilable, not all conflicts can be resolved, but there can be more creative and productive ways of disagreeing than we are used to (p. 252), and rather than hoping to resolve conflicts, they might at least be transformed. In support of this project, the book offers a systematic



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outline not only of the principles, but also the practice of interreligious engagement and study. Approaches to dialogue are explored, along with the potential benefits of community-based service, organisation and advocacy. The role of the arts is also considered both in terms of catalysing conversations around disagreements, but also as an area of potential collaboration.

The book contains many case summaries (often distilled from a number of sources, to maintain a critical distance from some of the potentially distracting particularities of the incidents) which provide excellent source materials for discussion or reflection. Overall, this is a valuable, substantial book, with the potential to influence both religious education and the wider social context. Highly recommended.

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